

Migrant Farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic: The Paradox of being Essential and
Vulnerable

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Zarah Fulay

The Ohio State University

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Project Advisor: Professor Inés Valdez, Department of Political Science

Abstract

The status of migrant Farmworkers in Immokalee, Florida during the pandemic created a paradox: they are both essential and vulnerable as their work remained necessary, but they were provided no protection. Longstanding social and economic inequalities were intensified with the virus and more vulnerabilities were created for the farmworkers, while the country continued to rely on the fruits of their labor. This thesis provides background in the history of migrant farmworkers in Immokalee and the continuation and increased vulnerabilities seen during the pandemic despite being essential as they provide the nation's food. The thesis then interrogates this paradox by examining the roots of the state's exploitative situation, such as the racialization of Latinx and legality status, and how this exploitation leads to the accumulation of labor and wealth. The thesis then examines the idea social reproduction necessary to continue production and the idea of transnationalism that expands the issue beyond the country's boundary. More precisely, this thesis examines a large source of the food supply of the country which is obtained through exploitative labor that positions farmworkers in highly vulnerable situations, whose lethal potential was made evident by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the world's eyes to open to many things, such as: the sanitation levels of areas we frequent, the number of resources we provide towards our medical system, and the idea of work from anywhere. The people also became aware of the treatment of workers we deem as essential. The pandemic allowed us to view what has always been going on but made it more salient with its spread. In this thesis, I focus on one specific group of essential workers -- the migrant farmworkers in Immokalee, Florida

The continuous work of migrant farmworkers in Immokalee was essential as the spread of COVID-19 began-- they worked when many other places shut down to provide the nation's food. Despite being essential, farmworkers were vulnerable because of the fear of deportation, the inability to miss work because they cannot afford losing hours, and the high potential of

contracting COVID-19 given little to no protective measures and equipment. While the lockdown from the pandemic made clear that farmworkers were “essential,” it also placed them in an even more vulnerable and unsafe position. There is a paradox here: how and why are farmworkers at once essential and vulnerable?

Farmworkers are exploited for their labor as they continue their long days of work with little pay. Despite working more than ten hours a day, these workers receive low wages which are barely enough to support themselves and their family. Because of being exploited for their labor, farmworkers are placed in a cyclical process that disallows them the chance to move up socially and are kept in a social class near or at poverty level. This is especially notable in Immokalee, where almost half of the population lives in poverty, while its neighbor, Naples, is one of the wealthiest cities in the United States. Despite being neighboring cities within Collier County, the income levels of Naples and Immokalee greatly differ. In Naples, the median household income in 2018 was \$94,394 with 9% of the population living in poverty.¹ In Immokalee, the median household income was \$30,426 with 42.4% of the population living in poverty.²

The exploitation of workers is rooted in the system of racial capitalism as it oppresses the farmworkers as a group because of their legal status (immigrants, often undocumented) and their racialization as brown Latinx. This means that the racialization of these workers and their undocumented legal status enables capitalist accumulation in Immokalee by creating vulnerable workers who can be paid minimal wages and given few rights. The racialization of the workers - an attribute the farmworkers - cannot change permits their exploitation, which allows for higher

¹ U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Naples city, Florida. (2018). Retrieved December 06, 2020, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/naplescifyflorida/INC110218>

² U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Immokalee CDP, Florida. (2018). Retrieved December 06, 2020, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/immokaleecdflorida>

profit. Thus, their racialization and vulnerable legal status keeps them unequal. By introducing the notion of transnationalism, I show that the exploitation of farmworkers in the United States can be understood as consistent with vulnerable working conditions faced in the Global South. This means that the racial, economic, and political processes that facilitate exploitation go beyond the boundary of the United States. The exploitation and vulnerability faced by the farmworkers in the Global North is comparable to the expected treatment of workers in the Global South and should be understood as part of a global system.

Workers are being oppressed racially, as brown, indigenous, and working class Mexican and Central American; economically, through capitalist exploitation; and politically/legally, through the vulnerability imposed by their lack of legal status. The workers in Immokalee have always faced these issues, yet the pandemic has made academia and the general public more aware of these systems of oppression. There has been an increase in the number of academic journals written about migrant farmworkers, specifically through the lens of the pandemic focusing on the enhanced mistreatment. As well, news sources have increased their coverage of the workers, especially during lockdown. One example is the local news, Naples Daily, which continuously covered the harsh treatments faced by the migrant farmworkers throughout the pandemic. A news directed more towards Immokalee's wealthier neighbor provided continuous insight of the problems occurring in Immokalee. Within the uncertainty and panic of the pandemic, it is time to use this heightened awareness to amplify knowledge about the mistreatment of those who are essential as a group yet are deemed replaceable as individuals.

In this thesis, I begin with background information on Immokalee, Florida and its history of migrant farmworkers and the agricultural business that is present in the area. This background provides the context of Immokalee in the agricultural sector and the persistence of farmworker

vulnerability. Then I discuss the migrant farmworkers as essential workers amidst the pandemic and more heightened vulnerabilities the workers faced. The treatment during the pandemic is consistent with the history of exploitation and provides the background for analyzing, next, the systemic oppression faced by these workers via the concepts of social reproduction and racial capitalism. I explain how these regimes have worked on racialized Latinx populations through the history of immigration. Finally, I make sense of the continuities of oppression in the Global South and the wealthy North through the framework of transnationalism.

Immokalee, Florida

Immokalee, Florida is an unincorporated town located within Collier County with a population of 26,597, in 2020, with a land area of 22.7 sq miles.³ The town is the center of the region's agriculture industry and a hub for migrant farmworkers to come and work in the vast fields during the harvest season of October – May, as the state's largest agriculture community. Immokalee has been a farm town since its settlement in 1872 and continues to be an agricultural enriched area as the town is one of the large sources of the nation's produce.⁴

Immokalee's migrant farmworkers came to prominence in the 1960s, through a documentary by *CBS Reports* that showed the nation the reality of working life on its farms. The nation was shown a farming town where the people who resided were mistreated and placed in a situation without prospects to advance. The stark conditions were reflected in the comments of a farm owner who stated that they "used to own our slaves, now, we just rent them."⁵ The

³ *Immokalee, Florida population 2021*. Immokalee, Florida Population 2021 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs). (2021). Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/immokalee-fl-population>.

⁴ *Project Staff - fgcu.edu*. Retrieved October 15, 2021, from <https://www.fgcu.edu/cob/reri/immokalee/immokalee2019.pdf>.

⁵ Friendly, Fred W. (Director). (1960) *Harvest of Shame*. [Documentary; Online Format]. CBS News.

farmworkers were equated to slaves and treated the same. This notion is important as the past treatment creates the foundation of the treatment to the migrant farmworkers today. On top of describing the low wages, the documentary featured workers' testimonies, among them one of the workers spoke about working from 5 am to 3:30 pm to receive only one dollar for their work, the equivalent to around nine dollars today. These low wages were not enough for survival and provided no chance for farmworkers to save. Another farmworker exemplified this notion when they stated that they had only a dollar and fifty cents to their name despite working each day, the equivalent to twelve dollars and forty cents today. The nation began to become aware of the people's lifestyle in Immokalee for the first time through this documentary and were shown how little these people earned. The living conditions offered to farmworkers were unsanitary, including the use of straw on the ground instead of beds, and rat and bug-ridden living areas. The nation became aware of the harsh treatment these farmworkers faced— an incredible realization as these workers lived in the same country as them.

Despite the exposure from the CBS's investigative journalism, the maltreatment of the migrant farmworkers continued with little to no change. The nation became aware of the problem, yet the farmworkers were still subjected to beating, intimidation, pistol-whippings, debt bondage, and more mistreatment.⁶ In reaction to these harsh treatments, the farmworker community came together to combat abuse and founded the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a worker-based human rights organization that fights against inhumane treatment and works to ensure the protection of farmworker rights. In the early 1990s, farmworkers began to meet more regularly to discuss wages and working conditions. They organized Tours to fast food

⁶ Drainville, André C. (2008) Present in the World Economy: The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (1996-2007), *Globalizations*, 5:3, 357-377, DOI: 10.1080/14747730802252495

headquarters to bring the truth of the unfair treatment workers faced to obtain ingredients for their meals. CIW was able to bring awareness of the abuses met by the farmworkers and fight against those who violated human rights practices by bringing them to court to break the cycle of abuse.⁷ They strategized to end enslavement practices, such as physically chaining workers inside trucks, fraudulently withholding wages, and charging exorbitant prices for food and lodging.⁸ CIW worked to combat modern-day slavery by transforming how major brands manage their supply chain. They organized marches, boycotts, and hunger strikes to pressure change, but rather than putting pressure on the growers, they pressured large corporations.⁹ When the corporations are put into the spotlight, it causes them to be more willing to change as they are wary of bad press. The result of the pressure was the agreement to the stated changes of the CIW. The organization brought awareness to the inhumane conditions of farmworkers and transformed them, yet these advances continue to be unsatisfactory.

I was able to visit Immokalee in the Spring of 2019. During my time there, I volunteered for *Pathways Early Education Center of Immokalee*, a daycare center created for migrant farmworkers children who are younger than school age. This organization teaches children foundational manners, such as sharing, washing hands, etc. – manners that are typically taught by parents through example. Due to farmworker working 6am to 5pm, the children are unable to be exposed to the examples. The daycare center provides play time, access to safe spaces, and nurturing caregivers, as well as other pedagogical benefits of early education. The children

⁷ *Anti-slavery program*. (2018, October 24). Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Retrieved October 15, 2021, from <https://ciw-online.org/slavery/>.

⁸ Rosile, Grace Ann, et al. (2021) The Coalition of Immokalee Workers Uses Ensemble Storytelling Processes to Overcome Enslavement in Corporate Supply Chain, *Business & Society*, 60(2), 376-414, DOI:10.1177/0007650320930416

⁹ Valdez, Inés (2020) Reconceiving Immigration Politics: Walter Benjamin, Violence and Labor, *American Political Science Review* (2020), 114, 1, 95-108, doi:10.1017/S0003055419000686

benefit as they are provided exposure to the everyday manners typically learned by watching family. Additionally, farmworkers benefit with the provided childcare; thus, they can work knowing their child is safe. The fundamental skills provided by *Pathways* somewhat countered the disadvantage children faced due to the lack of parent availability. It was eye-opening to reflect on how much parent's example sets us up for our lives and how the long hours worked by farmworkers, a necessary action required to provide for their family, has consequences on their children's development.

During my time in Immokalee, students from the University of Southern Florida were staying in the same ranch. They were taking a course centered around the labor of migrant farmworkers and were in Immokalee to see the area in which the farmworkers worked. Their stay in Immokalee demonstrated to me how the treatment of migrant farmworkers was being integrated in education as a university created a course to teach students of the mistreatment of farmworkers. In particular, it demonstrated to me the potential of pedagogically integrating migrant farmworker's treatment and living condition into a historically contextualized account and the potential for change. My time in Immokalee made me realize the importance of this topic beyond the movement of "Boycott Wendy," an initiative by CIW to put pressure on Wendy's to agree to verifiable protection of human right abuses in Wendy's supply chain, the only aspect of Immokalee farmworkers I had known prior to my stay.¹⁰

During this time, I was also able to see the dichotomy of Immokalee and their neighbor cities, specifically Naples. Immokalee was a bare town, with minimal shops and many abandoned store fronts. There were Mexican grocery stores and signs written in Spanish. There

¹⁰ Why Boycott Wendy's. Retrieved on November 2, 2021, from <http://www.boycott-wendys.org/>

were stalls of fresh produce picked from the farms and stands selling elotes and horchata. Going through the city, I could see the trailer homes where people lived, all put together in rows near each other. There were more trailers and farms than homes. Yet, one hour away in Naples, there was a plethora of mansions lined up next to each other. There were jewelry and clothing shops and high-end restaurants that lined the residential area. Tourists crowded the city. Amidst this luxury, my volunteer group was singled out and called slobs due to our appearance. The dramatic contrast between the two cities, only 42 miles apart, demonstrated obvious class differences.

Essential Workers

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “essential workers are those who conduct a range of operation and services that are essential to continue critical infrastructure operations” and belong to several major sectors, such as energy, agriculture, and food production.¹¹ Migrant farmworkers’ role in food production means under this definition they are essential and had to continue working during the COVID-19 outbreak. The workers are essential because the nation relies on them for a large portion of the nation’s food supply. In Immokalee, they harvest produce such as oranges, tomatoes, bell peppers and many more. Though the amount of produce needed was not increased during the pandemic, the continuous work of the farmworkers was necessary for the nation. Despite the reliance of society on these workers, they are marginalized and placed in positions that make them “particularly vulnerable to human rights violations” generally.¹² An even heightened vulnerability caused by exposure to the virus in the fields since the start of the pandemic.

¹¹ Suzanne Hultin, L. (2021). COVID-19: Essential Workers in the States, *NCSL*, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/covid-19-essential-workers-in-the-states.aspx>

¹² Miami Law: Human Rights Clinic. (2017). Farmworker Poverty and Human Rights. Retrieved December 06, 2020, from https://media.law.miami.edu/clinics/human-rights/pdf/2_immokolee_workers.pdf

Every year during the winter and early spring season, Immokalee is home to about 25,000 people of which 70% are farm laborers and about 43% live in poverty.¹³ With farm work being the largest job sector in town, most labor cannot be performed remotely, which forced the continuation of in-person interactions during the pandemic. The farm work had to continue, yet the way it is physically structured makes social distancing very difficult, thus making the farmworkers vulnerable to COVID-19.¹⁴

Moreover, given the large percentage of the population that lives in poverty, individuals' economic survival depended on continued work, thus preventing them from missing work despite concerns about contracting COVID-19. Even when workers started to present symptoms, they continued to go to the fields due to the lack of sick leave and their exclusion from the CARES Act and unemployment provisions. In short, undocumented workers' subsistence depends on continuing to work.¹⁵

Because the supply of workers is plentiful, workers realistically fear being replaced if they are unable to complete their work, which heightens the vulnerability of workers.¹⁶ Farmworkers perform an essential job, yet as individuals they are not essential due to the large available number of workers, the people can become easily replaced. As Beltran states, "they are essential precisely because there are too many of them."¹⁷ The copious number of workers makes them essential as a group, yet they are treated as a means to an end with no regards on their

¹³ Reiley, Laura (2020) "Migrant Farmworkers, Many Coronavirus Positive, Move North from Florida to Other States." The Washington Post. WP Company, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/11/migrant-farmworkers-many-who-have-tested-positive-covid-19-move-north-florida-other-farm-states/>.

¹⁴ Xiuhtecutli, Nezahualcoyotl and Shattuck (2021). Crisis politics and US farm labor: health justice and Florida farmworkers amid a pandemic, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 49:1, 73-98, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2020.1856089](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2020.1856089)

¹⁵ Manly, J. (2020). Statement on Farm Workers and COVID-19. Retrieved January 18, 2021, from <https://www.youngfarmers.org/farmworkerscovid19/>

¹⁶ Valdez, "Reconceiving Immigration Politics", 103

¹⁷ Beltrán, Cristina (2009) "Going Public: Hannah Arendt, Immigration Action, and the Space of Appearance" *Political Theory*, 37(5), 614, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25655506>

treatment. This situation illustrates “capital-preserving violence” where the market holds absolute power while the workers, whose dependency on wages, in the presence of high numbers of immigrant workers, forces them to work in exploitative conditions.¹⁸ Because of the powers the market holds, workers must continue to work despite their health condition or fear of the virus. Thus, the workers are far less likely to leave their work even when sick or to seek treatment. These thousands of other workers make it so that the market holds a power over them as there are already so many workers that individually, they are not to be worried about.

In addition to the risks of taking time off, farmworkers fear going to the hospital. Over half of the farmworkers are undocumented immigrants and lack health insurance or sick leave. This makes them less likely to get tested or treated even if they develop symptoms. Moreover, migrants fear going to the hospital because they fear reliance on social assistance might hurt their chances of receiving citizenship in the future or might lead to the detection of their status and deportation.¹⁹ The government’s negligible assistance is ignored because the farmworkers fear the potential consequences.

In the United States, around 53% of farmworkers are undocumented.²⁰ The threat of deportation deeply affects migrants such as causing psychological and cultural problems, community vulnerability, and isolation. These factors, moreover, are what facilitate the use of

¹⁸ Valdez, “Reconceiving Immigration Politics”, 104

¹⁹ Many low-income immigrants have been deterred from using non-cash government aid. Immigrants are scared to use government benefits and assistance because concerns of not being able to get legal citizenship. Immigrants fear the use of government aid especially with the Public Charge Rule established by the former Trump administration despite being rescinded currently. The rule made it more difficult for immigrants to achieve a legal status if they are using public benefits. This ruling discouraged immigrants from reaching out to the government to receive aid despite its necessary for citizens who are not able to currently afford basic needs – a situation especially prevalent due to the pandemic.

²⁰ Dudley, Mary Jo. CBS News. (2019). These U.S. industries can't work without illegal immigrants. Retrieved February 11, 2021, from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/illegal-immigrants-us-jobs-economy-farm-workers-taxes/>

undocumented workers as a highly exploited or reserve labor force.²¹ The undocumented status of the farmworkers makes it easier for farm owners to exploit the workers because they fear being turned in and deported. Undocumented workers will be paid \$5000 - \$10000 less than those who are in the United States legally.²² With the already low wages received by those in the agriculture business, undocumented citizens are put at even more disadvantage as they are being paid lower wages. Additionally, the workers are unable to fight the unfair lower wages because of their undocumented status. Farm owners exploit workers because the workers have little power to fight back using the legal system. The undocumented workers, already placed at a disadvantage as they are barely paid enough for survival, are unable to seek assistance from the government due to their fear of deportation.

The “essential” categorization from the pandemic provided a sense of security that they would be safeguarded against the police and immigrant authorities, however, this security applied exclusively to the workplace.²³ In their interaction with health services, the fear of detention and deportation meant that residents often provided fake names and addresses when they sought out testing, a reasonable measure but also one that made it difficult to track the spread of the virus. This fear was so widespread and well-known, that Immigration and Customs Enforcement adjusted its operations to avoid actions in health clinics.²⁴ Despite the adjustments, falsifications persisted.

²¹ Ngai, Mae M (2004). *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and The Making of Modern America*, Princeton University Press, 58

²² Coalition, *United States*

²³ Jordan, Miriam (2020). Farmworkers, mostly undocumented, become 'essential' during pandemic, New York Times, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-undocumented-immigrant-farmworkers-agriculture.html>

²⁴ Updated ice statement on covid-19. (2020). Retrieved February 11, 2021, from <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/updated-ice-statement-covid-19>

Farmworkers are also placed in vulnerable positions because of their overcrowded living conditions which facilitates contagion. It is common for more than one family to live in a single trailer, where up to 12-18 people may live, where residents had to spend up to 70% of their income to afford.²⁵ Farmworkers are exploited by landlords with the high rent because they know the workers need a place to live close to their work. Thus, by definition, farmworkers could not comply with the CDC's guidelines that there should be no gatherings larger than 10 people and social distancing should be maintained. Because of the exploitation by landlords and farm owner, the community was made more vulnerable to the spread of the virus. The lack of spaces for quarantine and the absence of medical facilities in the region add to this vulnerability. In addition to overcrowded living conditions, workers are also transported to the field in overcrowded buses and work in close proximity. Buses can contain from 40-50 people each, with workers sitting shoulder to shoulder.²⁶ Also, workers in the field stand within six feet of each other without any proper protection. In other words, the two actions necessary for preventing the virus – social distancing and self-isolation – are impossible for farmworkers. In sum, the food supply of the country is obtained through exploitative labor that translates into high profits for farm owners and buyers along the chain while positioning farmworkers in highly vulnerable situations, whose lethal potential was made evident by the COVID-19 outbreak.²⁷

Despite all these risk factors and their essential character, there has been little to no help received from the government. In fact, Governor DeSantis instead singled them out as a risk to

²⁵ The Problem. Retrieved December 06, 2020, from <https://www.ifha.info/problem>

²⁶ Mok, Aaron. (2020). Immokalee farmworkers still aren't Getting COVID-19 SUPPORT. Retrieved March 10, 2021, from <https://foodtank.com/news/2020/05/immokalee-farmers-demand-healthcare-protections-from-the-state-of-florida/>

²⁷ The maintenance within the homes depicts the harsh conditions that the farmworkers live within as there can be those who have holes in their floors and ceilings or mold that can lead to health problems or sometimes no toilets within the trailer. The people's basic needs are hardly being maintained, yet they are still required to a high rate which places them into a position that makes it harder to advance into a better position.

the community, stating, “You don’t want those folks mixing with the general public if you have an outbreak.”²⁸ The Governor acknowledged the magnitude of COVID-19 cases within the Immokalee community was a problem, however, rather than providing help to the community, the governor suggested isolation of “these folks.” A division was created between the rest of the state and those in the Immokalee community. This demonstrated the paradox of being at once essential and disposable: essential workers are not assisted by the government to continue essential work, but rather isolated from others to keep the COVID-19 outbreaks within this community. The government’s inadequacy and lagging response to the health needs of farmworkers through the outbreaks reflect a public health failure that devalued the contribution of workers who were deemed essential.²⁹ The government’s exclusion of the Immokalee workers demonstrated that they were deemed disposable. Their actions suggested that some groups were valued more as they were given protection against the virus, while others were not. These devalued groups include the farmworkers as they were isolated and ignored. The idea of Necropolitics, as defined by Mbembe as the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not, is reflected in the government’s action or lack of action.³⁰ The Governor exemplified this idea as he declared the lives of “those folks” (the migrant farmworkers) to be less important. The treatment of the workers during the pandemic suggested that their lives were worth less and disposable. The government was choosing who was worthy to live or die. The treatment of farmworkers seen during pandemic and the government’s exclusion of this community goes beyond hyper-exploitation and goes into the factor of death

²⁸ Mazzei, Patricia. (2020). Florida's coronavirus spike is Ravaging Migrant Farmworkers. Retrieved March 13, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/florida-coronavirus-immokalee-farmworkers.html>

²⁹ Zeitlin, Janine. (2021). *How Florida left farmworkers out of its COVID-19 pandemic response*. Naples News. Retrieved June 21, 2021, from <https://www.naplesnews.com/story/news/coronavirus/2021/03/28/covid-florida-left-farmworkers-out-pandemic-response-ron-desantis-nikki-fried/6922068002/>.

³⁰ Mbembe, Achilles (2003). Necropolitics, Duke University Press, *Public Culture*, 15(1), 27

because the government is forcing the workers to continue going to work yet does not provide necessary protection or resources.

In the absence of state intervention, CIW organized to protect the community by providing translated information of the virus, increased busing, and masks, yet these measures were the bare minimum of what was needed.³¹ The workers and the community needed help from the governor, thus the organization made a list of demands. These demands included: consistent and accessible testing resources; effective contact tracing protocols and isolation resources; personal protection gear provided by employers; and public funds for economic relief for farmworkers and their families.³² Demands that were never met.

This community-based intervention enlisted Partners in Health, an organization whose mission is to provide medical benefits to those in need, especially those in poverty. Partners in Health trained Immokalee residents to serve as health promoters and spread health information to empower the Immokalee community to fight against COVID-19.³³ The protection of the people was placed on the community. As well, the intervention of outside organization was necessary because of the exclusion of this group from government resources and protection.

The pandemic highlights the extreme vulnerability experienced by migrant farmworkers. Though the conditions described in this section occur in normal years for farmworkers, the pandemic caused the exploitative practices to be exponentially more harmful as workers lives were threatened daily.

³¹ Mazzei "Florida's coronavirus spike is Ravaging Migrant Farmworkers"

³² CIW COVID-19 Response. Retrieved March 13, 2021, from <https://www.immokaleecovid19.org/>

³³ *Florida migrant workers Among hardest hit BY COVID-19*. Partners In Health. (2020). Retrieved August 15, 2021, from <https://www.pih.org/article/florida-migrant-workers-among-hardest-hit-covid-19>.

Racialization of Latinx and Racial Capitalism

Mexican-Americans and Mexican migrants have historically constituted the agricultural proletariat in the United States. The reliance on the Chicano and Mexican community for agriculture has been prevalent in the United States for decades because they have provided cheap labor on necessary goods, thus these communities have played and continue to play an important role in the country's economy. The farm owners' control over the workers, explained by Mario Barrera in his book *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* has the characteristics of colonial labor: labor repression, dual wages, a low-wage occupationally stratified system, and the use of minority workers as a reserve.³⁴ Mexican-American people have struggled since colonial time because they are in a system of the economy where they are used for their labor. As early as the 20th century, there was a difference in the agricultural business between the wages of Mexican-American people and white people ranging \$.70 to \$1 a day more for white people.³⁵ Because employers know the workers provide cheap labor, the workers are extorted for low wages. The need for cheap labor from the Latinx community continues and is demonstrated by my case study of Immokalee. Migrant farmworkers are essential for the accumulation of labor, yet they are compensated with low wages because they are part of the Latinx immigrant community.

As explained by Mae Ngai, the Chicano community laid the basis for the modern Southwest's economy by providing labor power to the agricultural revolution after World War I.³⁶ The economy was damaged from the war but because of the Chicano community's low

³⁴ Barrera, Mario (1979). Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality. University of Notre Dame, 77-80.

³⁵ Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest*, 78

³⁶ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 129.

waged labor in the agriculture business, the economy was able to be revived. However, this revival was only able to grow because the workers were exploited. These low waged workers were necessary for the economy to grow and continue to be necessary to ensure low costs for produce. Agribusiness desired large numbers of Mexican laborers but it was necessary to ensure continued Euro-American control and domination.³⁷ This was achieved by the economic and social segregation and isolation of Mexicans. Agribusiness needed the work of Mexican laborers to secure low costs historically, and they relied on their segregation to facilitate control. As described in earlier sections, presently the workers continue to be isolated from the general population and control over them remains high, setting the basis for intensification of exploitation and vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic. These lines of continuity are evident, even if this system is no longer formally enshrined as an equivalent of Jim Crow practices in the South, as was the case throughout “the Southwest, especially in Texas.”³⁸ Mexican Americans and immigrants were required to be separated and they lived in their own areas. They were not allowed to frequent places that were patronized by whites. The Mexican-American community was racialized to keep them away from whites yet kept around for their labor.

The process of racialization of migrant workers is compounded by their citizenship status which ranges from full citizenship to documented migrants, undocumented immigrants, and guest workers.³⁹ Around 30,000 laborers are temporarily brought into the United States for agricultural work under the H2A guest work visa, which allows for agricultural employers to

³⁷ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 131

³⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 132

³⁹ The origin of non-citizens and naturalized citizens are 98.7% and 99% from Latin America. The statistics show that almost all the immigrants that come to Immokalee come from Latin American.

bring foreign workers into the country under temporary visas to work exclusively on the employer's farm.⁴⁰ Before the H2A program, the Bracero Program – in place between 1942 to 1965 – supplied cheap and vulnerable labor to US agriculture. The program was an administrative measure to institutionalize the supply of Mexican/migrant labor for US capitalism, mostly for agriculture.⁴¹ This program allowed United States' government to hold control on who entered. The country needed cheap labor but acquired it using a structured program where the control would be held by the government. The Bracero program and the H2A program are both examples of institutionalized measures to bring Mexican workers into the country to be used as cheap labor, now superseded by the construction of illegality.

Migrant illegality is a social condition inseparable from the racialization of Mexican migrants as illegal aliens. They are seen as invasive violators of the law, and foreigners, subverting the integrity of the nation and its sovereignty.⁴² Similarly, undocumented farmworkers' exclusion from the community follow their immigration status and construction as lawbreakers. Not only are they excluded socially from the nation, but also from the aid received from the government. For example, during the Great Depression, Mexican migrants and US-born Mexican citizens were systematically excluded from employment and economic relief, as the aid was exclusively for "Americans" who were presumed more "deserving."⁴³ Mexicans were seen as undeserving. This exclusion from government aid was also seen with the pandemic as farmworkers were excluded from the CARES act. The U.S. developed programs to receive cheap labor, but also ensured their separation by socially positioning them as strangers and excluding

⁴⁰ Recipe for Slavery: Take US farm labor relations, add "guestworker" visas, and voila... Force Labor! (September 23, 2010). https://ciw-online.org/blog/2010/09/global_horizons_prosecution/

⁴¹ De Genova, Nicholas. (2004). *The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant "Illegality."* Latino Studies 2004, 4, 164. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600085>

⁴² De Genova, *The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant "Illegality"* 161.

⁴³ De Genova, *The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant "Illegality"* 164

them from government aid. This structure of control and isolation allows them to keep the farmworkers in a vulnerable state.

I have noted that farmworkers are seen as essential as a group, yet their separation and isolation allow for their exploitation, thus, as individuals, they are disposable. Farmworkers are constructed as less than human and their identity as Latinx immigrants has caused their devaluation and their labor to become commodified.⁴⁴ The people are dehumanized and made into an instrument in the line of production – the material practices of exploitation that capitalism relies upon. The continuation of capitalism dehumanizes people, particularly based on race.⁴⁵ The workers are treated rather than human but as a tool to receive a commodity.

The historical modes of separation of brown migrants and farmworkers from white people are still prevalent as seen between the stark difference in the racial demographics of Naples and Immokalee despite being within the same county. Out of 19,000 people, 88.8% of Naples' population is white non-Hispanic, while only 970 of them (4.45%) are white Hispanic.⁴⁶ In contrast, Immokalee's population is 66.5% white Hispanic (17,700 people), while white non-Hispanic make up around 5.02% (1,330 people).⁴⁷ Differences in racial demographics of the two cities within the same county demonstrate a continuation of the historical segregation, which cements their isolation and allows for their mistreatment in these predominately brown Mexican and Central American immigrant communities. This isolation became more heightened with the pandemic and created a hotspot of infection, to which the government responded by suggesting

⁴⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 132

⁴⁵ Bhattacharya, Gargi (2018). *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival (Cultural Studies and Marxism)*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, x

⁴⁶ Naples, FL. Data USA. Retrieved July 14, 2021, from <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/naples-fl/#demographics>.

⁴⁷ Immokalee, FL. Data USA. Retrieved July 15, 2021, from <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/immokalee-fl/#demographics>.

the isolation of this group from the rest of state to contain the spread. This was only possible because of the historical processes of devaluation of brown migrants' lives. With the pandemic, the government used their social and political power to dictate the value of people, thus using its power to decide who will die and who will live.

The racialization of the farmworkers marks them as lesser and makes them subject to exploitation. The idea of racial capitalism, which is the account of how the world made through racism shapes patterns of capitalist development, explains the structure of oppression faced by the workers in Immokalee.⁴⁸ By this, I mean that racism– the racialization of brown migrant groups- and the exploitation that results from racism shapes pattern of capitalism. This includes the accumulation of capital through the cheap wages and profits appropriated by the employer.

Farmworkers are paid at the same rate as they were in 1980: 50 cents for every 32 lbs. of tomatoes. Typically, they must work 10-hour days to receive minimum wage.⁴⁹ This poverty-level wage barely allows farmworkers to afford necessary expenses. Farm owners are ensuring the lowest wages to the workers for them to maintain social reproduction but also remain in a low social status. The U.S. Department of Labor has described the farmworkers' labor force as “in significant economic distress.”⁵⁰ Workers do not receive the amount of money to comfortably live; rather, they are barely receiving the minimum wage.⁵¹ They also have no right to overtime nor to organize - a result of intentional exclusion from the New Deal labor reform, as mentioned

⁴⁸ Bhattacharya. *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, 104

⁴⁹ Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Retrieved December 06, 2020, from <https://ciw-online.org/farmworker-facts-figures/>

⁵⁰ Coalition of Immokalee Workers

⁵¹ Farmworker facts & figures. (2013). Retrieved February 11, 2021, from <https://ciw-online.org/farmworker-facts-figures/>

previously⁵² Though the farmworkers are unable to receive overtime pay, the workers need to work overtime to receive minimum wage for that day.

To maintain social reproduction, U.S. citizens have increasingly been placed outside of the formal wage economy.⁵³ This means that social reproduction – the everyday actions of maintaining life and reproducing the next economy – is not always placed in a formal economy but sometimes is placed in an informal economy.⁵⁴ Unlike a formal economy, where there is an organized system of employment, the migrant farmworkers are in an informal economy, thus their job has little or no job security. Because of the racial division of labor and the more general racial operation of capitalism, it is people of color who become relegated to lower paid and lower status work, which hinders their own social reproduction. The status of illegality, as well, subjects the workers to arduous labor, which reduces their existence to their willingness to engage in toilsome practices for the maintenance of life.⁵⁵ This framework helps explain the treatment of Immokalee farmworkers, who, while being essential for the reproduction of the U.S. workforce, can only access poverty wages. During the pandemic, this form of imposed vulnerability has only worsened, adding vulnerability to infection due to the lack of emergency unemployment compensation and the continuation of working conditions that make workers vulnerable to infection and unable to access medical attention.

Marx's account of social reproduction uncovers a contradiction between what is necessary for the worker and the way that capitalism works. Capitalists need laborers as they are

⁵² Farmworker facts & figures.

⁵³ Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking racial capitalism*, 43.

⁵⁴ Bakker, Isabella. *Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Economy*, *New Political Economy*, 12:4, 541, DOI:10.1080/13563460701661561

⁵⁵ Beltrán, "Going Public", 600

unable to do the labor themselves while workers need wages and social services to meet their basic subsistence needs.⁵⁶ The contradiction emerges between the goal of profit and the proper conditions for meeting human necessities, which operate as costs that decrease profit and detracts from the accumulations of capital. This means that “they must control the wages and social spending that pay for the renewal of the workforce.”⁵⁷ Social reproduction requires the capitalist to ensure the workers ability to continue to work without allowing them the chance to accomplish anything outside of their work. In other words, the capitalist is interested in social reproduction only insofar as it enables workers to continue their work by keeping them alive. Marx’s idea of capitalism relies on the use of a global system because it requires aspects of commodity originating from other places – for farms, the commodity required is workers from other countries. Migrant farmworkers are not reproducing in the U.S, but rather in other countries and once they are socially reproduced in the Global South to the age where they are able to work, they are brought to the Global North. For farm work to continue and Marx to apply, the social reproduction prior to work must occur in the Global South then once the person is of age to work, they are brought to the Global North and provided low wages enough to meet the conditions of survival.

The central Marxist insight, however, does not consider how race and gender modify relations of social reproduction, and how different sub-groups are subjected to different degrees of exploitation. This means that capitalism relies on hierarchies of race and gender to facilitate these divisions and minimize the cost of social reproduction. Silvia Federici explains:

⁵⁶ Marx, Karl (1992.). *Capital: A critique of Political Economy*. Moscow, USSR: Progress Publisher, 124

⁵⁷ Ferguson, Susan (2018. Social Reproduction Theory: What's the Big Idea? Retrieved October 26, 2020, from <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/social-reproduction-theory-ferguson/>

“Capitalism, as a social economic system, is necessarily committed to racism and sexism.”⁵⁸ In practice, this means that the activities necessary for the social reproduction of U.S. citizens has increasingly been relegated to spaces outside the formal wage economy.⁵⁹ Because of the racial division of labor and the more general racial operation of capitalism, it is people of color who become relegated to lower paid and lower status work, which hinders their own social reproduction. This framework helps explain the treatment of Immokalee farmworkers, who, while being essential for the reproduction of the U.S. workforce, can only access poverty wages.

However, the idea of social reproduction is neglected during the pandemic by the government and farm owners. Mbembe’s idea of the government’s choice of people’s value and disposability demonstrate the lack of social reproduction as the idea of keeping the workers alive is abandoned. The abandonment of social reproduction during the pandemic occurs because the plethora of workers available. This means that the copious numbers of workers allow for the capitalist to not need to keep their workers alive because they could replace the deceased with new workers.

The racialization of migrant farmworkers, because they are part of the Latinx community and because of their legal status, causes the dehumanization of workers; they are seen as merely an accumulation of labor that must be paid at the minimal level for survival. The exploitative treatment of the workers continues because of the control that Euro-Americans hold over the workers – a control gained through isolation.

Transnationalism

⁵⁸ Federici, Silvia. (2014). *Caliban and the Witch*, New York: Autonomedia, 17

⁵⁹ Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking racial capitalism*, 43

As the previous section make clear, the reproduction of capitalism is facilitated by racism and structure of separation. The impulses of capitalism, moreover, are to “globalize exploitation.”⁶⁰ Farm owners can exploit workers to appropriate and capitalize on the value they create by minimizing wages and protections, even in the context of the spread of a deadly disease. Understanding the creation of vulnerable spaces for those workers within the US requires a transnational approach. Transnationalism demonstrates the interactions and overlaps of social fields that exceed the physical boundaries of a nation.⁶¹ For the case of exploited migrant workers in Immokalee, a transnational approach that understands fields as exceeding the boundaries of nations helps explain why foreign workers, who are racialized and lack status, experience conditions of exploitation and vulnerability akin to that experience in the Global South. As foreigners, they are excluded from public life and state services, and ultimately must rely on themselves, charity, or international aid organizations. The farmworkers are treated as if they resided in the Global South, politically and culturally marginalized despite residing in the Global North, which is typically more developed and wealthier.

With the worsening of cases, Doctors without Borders (DWB), *Médecins Sans Frontières*, was called to Immokalee to help administer testing. DWB first learned of the concerning situation in Immokalee after being contacted by the CIW and after sending an assessment team at the end of April of 2020, DWB quickly realized that health education and testing activities needed to be increased immediately.⁶² In their two-month stay, they offered testing during times that allowed workers to get tested without skipping work - increasing the

⁶⁰ Federici, *Caliban and the witch*, 17

⁶¹ Valdez, Inés (2019). “Association for Emancipation: A Transnational Account of the Politics of Global Justice. *Empire, Race, and Global Justice*.” Duncan Bell. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 120-144.

⁶² Florida: Doctors Without Borders ends COVID-19 activities in Immokalee. (2020). Retrieved January 04, 2021, from <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/florida-doctors-without-borders-ends-covid-19-activities-immokalee>

three-day availability to six days including some weekends and evenings. DWB also provided interpretation services at the testing and outreach locations to reach out to those with limited English skills. During their time in Immokalee, DWB ran 12 pop-up clinics and administered over 465 COVID tests in a six-week period. On June 2, statistics demonstrated that 36% of the tests were positive, compared to Florida's overall 5.6% positivity rate.⁶³ This demonstrated how within this community, there was a large vulnerability to the contagion, explained by the structural working and living conditions described earlier in this thesis. During the two-month stay of DWB, 15,000 to 20,000 migrant workers continued to work despite the dangers, demonstrating the inability of these workers to take time off despite the increased risk of contagion.⁶⁴ By June 26, DWB left Immokalee and handed over the testing to the county health department and local organization. Without the DWB, there would have been no accessible hours for the workers' testing, despite continuous demands from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to the Florida Governor Ron DeSantis

Doctors without Borders has always been perceived as serving third-world countries that don't have the resources to help themselves. The organization helps areas in distress and provides them with necessary medical attention and resources. The involvement of DWB in the United States highlights that such communities within the wealthiest countries in the world are completely helpless because of racist and capitalist structures as described in the previous section. The government had not helped the farmworkers during the spread of COVID-19 and therefore an organization known to help the most vulnerable to had step in.

⁶³ CIW. (2020). At "the epicenter of the epicenter"... Retrieved January 03, 2021, from <https://ciw-online.org/blog/2020/07/at-the-epicenter-of-the-epicenter/>

⁶⁴ Florida: Doctors Without Borders ends COVID-19 activities in Immokalee.

DWB's aid is predominately directed to developing countries – aid to the U.S. does not fit its mission. It is difficult to envision the world leader to need the help of an organization geared towards developing countries. However, with the COVID-19 spread, DWB had to intervene and help the community of Immokalee, Florida (as well as the Indigenous People in the Navajo Nation and Pueblos⁶⁵). Rather than the government providing the same resources to the migrant farmworker community as they did the rest of the nation, the government treated them as though they are not part of the nation. The historic exclusion of those valued less, such as the migrant farmworkers, was made clear. The community guidance and creation of protection to regulate the spread of the virus shows that this community is a country inside a country. This means that because of the isolation from the nation and government, farmworkers created a self-sustaining community to protect themselves despite being in a country with a working government that is supposed to help provide protection. The intervention of DWB in Immokalee illustrates how the social field of exploitation exceed the physical boundary of the nation.

Despite being within a wealthy country, the maltreatment of migrant farmworkers demonstrates the hyper-marginalization of communities within the West. Wealth requires social reproduction that requires the exploitation of people who thus remain in poverty. This hyper marginalization depends on the construction of racialized groups who are not worthy of protection and can be treated in ways similar to those in countries of the Global South, in what Inderpal Grewal calls “The Global South within the West.” The Global South are categorized as low-income; thus when the typical events of these low-income countries appear in wealthier countries (the Global North also known as the West) it becomes neglected in the Global North,

⁶⁵ *MSF hands over its Covid-19 programs in the Navajo nation and pueblos*. Doctors Without Borders - USA. (2020). Retrieved September 23, 2021, from <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/msf-hands-over-its-covid-19-programs-navajo-nation-and-pueblos>.

because it is not intelligible in binary understandings of a “prosperous” Global North as opposed to supposedly “poor” Global South.⁶⁶ Exploitative measures occur in the Global South similarly to that of the Global North, specifically in this case the Immokalee farmworkers. The same actors of control in Immokalee, farm owners and corporations, are present in the Global South due to the outsource of cheap labor. These same actors provide harsh treatments to those in both the Global South and Global North. Despite the same treatment, farmworkers are more prone to move to the Global North because though they are being treated the same, the workers can reside in a wealthy country. The farmworkers in Immokalee are exploited because various reasons as mentioned previously, yet the exploitation faced in the Global North is favorable. However, exploitation is perceived typical in the Global South, while in the Global North, the exploitation is obscured because of the racialized history.

Conclusion

As the pandemic has progressed, the poor conditions that farmworkers have faced, such as crowded farms and homes, have not lessened but the spread of the virus has decreased because of the community outreach. A group of health workers, known as promotoras, was created by DWB and continues to provide care to the community.⁶⁷ The virus has also decreased due to the vaccine, as thousands of farmworkers have been vaccinated.

However, a disparity remains between the migrant farmworkers and the rest of the nation. While the vaccines are accessible to everyone, it remains a challenge for those who are low-

⁶⁶ Grewal, Inderpal (2013). Outsourcing Patriarchy: Feminist encounters, transnational, mediations, and the crime of “Honour Killings”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:1, 7, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2012.755352

⁶⁷ Zeitlin, Janine (2021). “*Who is going to help me?*”: *How a Florida team brings healthcare to this community*, Naples News. Retrieved from Nov 11, 2021, from <https://www.naplesnews.com/in-depth/news/2021/08/23/healthcare-team-coronavirus-test-vaccine-assistance-immokalee-fl/7878537002/>

income because they either do not have the time or the technology to get an appointment to receive the vaccine.⁶⁸ As well, members of the wealthy neighboring communities traveled to receive vaccines in the same venue where farmworkers were to receive their vaccines, thus taking away the resources away from the Immokalee community. The vaccine remains inaccessible to the farmworkers, and they are not provided resources to combat this inaccessibility.

Governor DeSantis remained consistent in his lack of help towards the farmworkers in Immokalee. When vaccines were beginning to be more regularly administered in early March 2021, the Governor stated that he would not vaccinate farmworkers as had been done with other essential workers. This made it clear that farmworkers were not being prioritized, despite there being federal recommendations to provide early access.⁶⁹ The government continues to view farmworkers as less valuable than privileged groups.

During the pandemic, the status of migrant Farmworkers in Immokalee, Florida constitutes a paradox; they are essential yet vulnerable as their work remained necessary but were provided no protection. The pandemic demonstrated the extreme harm that comes from the current treatment farmworkers face as it makes them more vulnerable to the spread of the virus. The historical exploitation of the workers remains today and places the workers in a more vulnerable state as the virus spreads, an exploitation rooted on the racialization of Latinx and lack of legal status. The racialization of the workers made them a cheap commodity to be used as an instrument in production that is provided in large numbers. The vulnerabilities are produced by the government

⁶⁸ Zeitlin, Janine. (2021). *How Florida left farmworkers out of its COVID-19 pandemic response*. Naples News. Retrieved June 21, 2021, from <https://www.naplesnews.com/story/news/coronavirus/2021/03/28/covid-florida-left-farmworkers-out-pandemic-response-ron-desantis-nikki-fried/6922068002/>.

⁶⁹ Zeitlin, *How Florida left farmworkers out of its COVID-19 pandemic response*

through isolation and exclusion that devalued the workers—their devaluation that makes them treated similarly to exploited groups in the Global South. With the uncertainty of the virus as more harmful variants spread, the vulnerability of the migrant farmworkers presently and in the future does not weaken but rather remains just as dangerous as they continue to be devalued and excluded from government protection.